

Opening haul road may be a mistake

by Rep. Eileen MacLean
for the Tundra Times

JUNEAU — The Dalton Highway, also known as the North Slope haul road, is used primarily to truck equipment to Prudhoe Bay oilfields.

OPINION

Inupiat Paitot
People's Heritage

Senate Bill 366, which has passed the Senate and is being considered by the House, would permit unrestricted travel on the highway, apparently as a tourism novelty.

I want to offer some ideas on the potential adverse impacts — not only on the departments that regulate traffic along the haul road, but on the people of the region — should the haul road be opened to the general public with little or no restriction for year-round access.

When the Utility Corridor was created and the haul road constructed, the only stated functions of the system were to facilitate the transportation of supplies and materials to the Prudhoe Bay infrastructure and to transport oil and gas from the North Slope to southern markets.

We were assured that negative impacts on subsistence resources and subsistence activities would be mitigated by a restriction on use of the road to only that traffic associated directly with the expressly stated industrial functions of the corridor.

Now we are being asked to yield to the pressures of vocal urban residents who wish to use the area for recreation.

Increased public access will result in increased disturbance of subsistence resources and further displacement from traditional hunting areas.

Traditional subsistence activities within the corridor are vital to the people of the region. However, these activities have been somewhat curtailed in the area only because there is now a road, a pipeline and significant traffic there. Further disruption which will result from increased access and recreational activity is unacceptable to the people of the region.

In addition, as has always proven the case in the past, greater uncon-

Expenses are underestimated



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trolled access to our rural communities will result in a marked increase in alcohol, drug and other social problems which are already overwhelming.

I am also fearful that settlements which grow up around facilities developed to serve increased traffic will blossom into permanent communities requiring municipal services. The North Slope Borough does not have the financial resources to build and maintain additional schools, sanitation, public safety and health facilities.

Even with the increased funding proposed, the state will not be able to properly control the activities of an increased number of users of the full length of the road.

The existing state Department of Transportation checkpoint at Chandalar has proven totally ineffective in regulating even the limited traffic which now uses the road. Vehicles frequently drive through the checkpoint without stopping, and the single DOT employee stationed there has no way of knowing whether they have the required permit or not.

Even if a vehicle is suspected of being unpermitted, there are not the resources to pursue and apprehend the violator. The inability of the state to adequately enforce its permit regulations at even a simple checkpoint convinces us that promised control of increased traffic also will be ineffective.

Because mismanagement already has resulted in impacts along the road, I feel that policies governing access and enforcement efforts should be strengthened, rather than weakened. Mismanagement of the highway is evidenced by improper disposal of refuse and abuse of game resources.

The state DOT, with a supporting informal opinion of the Department of Law, has deemed guide and outfitter activities to be commercial and allowed access since 1986. Many sport hunters have gained access by filing fictitious mining claims in the area of the corridor. The state has yet to establish a fine schedule or other penalty for violations of AS 19.49.210, which prohibits the use of off-road vehicles within five miles of the road right-of-way.

The departments in charge of regulating activity along the highway, such as the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, DOT and the Department of Public Safety have expressed concern about the increased cost associated with opening the highway.

The cost estimates to maintain the highway during the extra months, reflected in the fiscal notes approved by the Senate State Affairs Committee, were reduced considerably to half the amount by the Senate Finance Committee in order to make the bill more palatable for senators' consideration on the floor.

I believe the expenses are underestimated. If the measure cannot be defeated, then a higher fiscal note must be passed along with it.

Additional money for funding is crucial to upgrade what is currently a narrow, dirt road and to regulate activity caused by the increased traffic should the highway be opened.

Please feel free to contact my office if you have any questions regarding this position. Call my office at 465-4525 (collect) or by mail at Box V, Juneau 99811.